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Chinese Thorns Along the Vietnamese Border: Means to Many Ends

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An Intelligence Assessment

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This paper was prepared by [redacted]
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**Chinese Thorns Along
the Vietnamese Border:
Means to Many Ends**

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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 20 December 1985
was used in this report.*

In the seven years since the Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia, the Chinese have regularly initiated scattered, small-scale fighting along the China-Vietnam border. By doing so, the Chinese have forced Hanoi to keep its best troops along the Chinese frontier and unavailable for duty in Cambodia. Over the past 18 months, however, we have seen a shift in Beijing's military strategy and a greater use of the clashes to meet other objectives such as influencing its relations with the United States, the Soviet Union, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

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The new "strategy of a thousand thorns," adopted in April 1984, involves the battle for and occupation of small pieces of Vietnamese territory—action that has provoked the Vietnamese into protracted and bloody combat to regain lost territory:

- The fighting involves hand-to-hand combat from entrenched and bunkered positions as well as heavy shelling of Vietnamese villages and military positions.
- The human and materiel price has been heavy. Hundreds of battles have been fought and thousands of lives lost. The burden of supporting from 50,000 to 120,000 men in the field, moreover, has caused substantial dislocations to the local Chinese economy.

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The Chinese have controlled the fighting carefully, however, limiting it to a small salient in a remote area. By doing so, Beijing avoids the international condemnation and steep military costs that would come with a major attack on Vietnam and, at the same time, plays to the strength of Chinese forces in that area—nonmechanized infantry operations that do not rely on long logistic lines or close air support.

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Beijing is aware that such limited warfare will not force Hanoi to alter its Cambodia policy; indeed, the Chinese at times appear as much interested in the experience gained for their military modernization program as in the pressure exerted on Vietnam:

- The fighting has provided a training ground for Chinese infantry forces and the recently rejuvenated officer corps. Units from nearly every military region have rotated to the border over the past 18 months, and many graduates from China's military academies spend their first tour there.

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- The clashes also give the Chinese the opportunity to test new military equipment—some of it acquired from abroad—



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The conflict over the past 18 months has increasingly become an integral part of Beijing's foreign policy, influencing its relations with the United States, the Soviet Union, and members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It gives China a card to play in the strategic triangle—by manipulating the level of fighting during high-level US or Soviet visits, Beijing can graphically display a congruence with US policy interests in Asia or, alternately, a willingness to further the dialogue with Moscow. The pressure on Vietnam also strengthens China's relations with ASEAN nations supporting the resistance effort in Cambodia



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Because Beijing believes its actions along the Vietnamese frontier meet important domestic and foreign policy needs, we expect the fighting will continue indefinitely. But we do not look for China to expand the scope of the fighting substantially—although it maintains the force strength and capability to do so—without a significant provocation, such as a major Vietnamese incursion into Thailand. We also believe that Hanoi will accept the costs of the conflict rather than escalate the tension; as long as the fighting remains under control, the Vietnamese will not be forced to alter their policy in Cambodia.



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Figure 1. "It is an important policy of China to remove the threat posed by Vietnamese authorities against the security of its borders and safeguard peace and stability in Southeast Asia . . . The Chinese Government has made it clear time and again that the traditional friendship between China and Vietnam can be rebuilt provided the Vietnamese authorities withdraw all their invading troops from Kampuchea and renounce their expansionist policy."

Liberation Army Pictorial ©

Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, February 1985, during visit to the Malipo front on the sixth anniversary of China's invasion of Vietnam.

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Chinese Thorns Along the Vietnamese Border: Means to Many Ends

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Beijing's Strategy of a Thousand Thorns

In search of ways to continue to press Hanoi militarily without engaging in a politically risky and economically debilitating full-scale war with Vietnam, Beijing in the spring of 1984 adopted a "strategy of a thousand thorns."

the strategy calls for the occupation of small segments of Vietnamese territory to force the Vietnamese to try to dislodge the occupying Chinese forces. By thus engaging Vietnamese forces in limited but protracted and bloody combat, China rejuvenated its Vietnam policy in a way that serves a multitude of functions without the international condemnation or financial and manpower costs that would result from a major Chinese attack:

- Border clashes compel Hanoi to keep its best divisions—at a high state of readiness—in northern Vietnam and unavailable for duty in Cambodia.
- Threats of wider warfare require Vietnam to maintain a large standing army in the north, an act that Beijing believes bleeds the Vietnamese economically.
- Tensions with Vietnam serve as instruments of Chinese foreign policy, proving to the world that China actively opposes Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia and Hanoi's "collusion" with Moscow.
- Harassment of the Vietnamese allows Beijing to point to a congruence with US foreign policy in East Asia and has created new bonds with Thailand and opened doors to improving relations with other Southeast Asian nations.
- Finally, limited warfare tests the mettle of Beijing's rejuvenated armed forces and reminds China's youth of their military obligation.

The Cambodian Connection

Politically, China's "unheralded war" is motivated by a variety of factors including rival regional ambitions,

chagrin at Hanoi's turn toward Moscow, anger over Vietnam's ingratitude for China's assistance during the Vietnam war, territorial disputes, and ethnic animosity. But since 1978 the "explicit" reason offered by Beijing for Sino-Vietnamese tensions has been the presence of Hanoi's troops in Cambodia.

Beijing implies that Chinese-Vietnamese relations can be normalized—diplomatic relations have never been severed—only if all Vietnamese forces are withdrawn from Cambodia. This policy line serves Beijing well as it casts China's antipathy toward Vietnam in an international light—as opposed to simply a quarrel between neighbors—and reassures ASEAN and the Cambodian resistance of China's continued opposition to Vietnamese domination of Indochina.

Strategic Concerns

Beijing first implemented its strategy on 28 April 1984 at the height of Vietnam's 1983/84 dry season campaign (November-May) in Cambodia by seizing at least five hilltops 1 to 2 kilometers inside Vietnam's Ha Tuyen Province. But, even at that juncture, we believe Beijing had broader strategic objectives than Cambodia in mind:

- The assaults—the first division-sized attack against Vietnam since 1979—were timed to coincide with President Reagan's visit to Beijing. Reminiscent of China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979 on the heels of Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's visit to Washington, the assaults were manipulated by Beijing to suggest tacit US support.
- Beijing also was responding to an unprecedented joint Soviet-Vietnamese amphibious exercise in the Gulf of Tonkin conducted in mid-April.
- Finally, Beijing signaled Moscow that it was not intimidated by the growing Soviet military presence at Cam Ranh and in the South China Sea and was prepared to jeopardize the planned visit of Soviet First Deputy Premier Arkhipov to Beijing—scheduled for early May—to prove this point. Arkhipov

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did abruptly cancel the visit as Moscow apparently calculated among other things that it could not risk even larger Chinese attacks on Vietnam during his visit. []

These broader strategic calculations have continued to be major factors in China's calculus of military action against Vietnam. In fact, the level of fighting sometimes has little relationship to events in Cambodia. []

[] Having improved their security relationship with the United States, we believe the Chinese thought they were in a better position to make a few gestures to Moscow. Moreover, analysis of speeches by Chinese leaders at the time strongly suggests differences within the Chinese leadership, with some senior party figures—including Chen Yun and Peng Zhen—advocating a more accommodating stance toward Moscow in order to improve relations with the Soviet Union. []

Once Arkhipov departed China, however, Chinese forces initiated some of the heaviest battles of the 18-month campaign in retaliation for Vietnamese assaults on Communist and non-Communist resistance bases along the Thailand-Cambodia border. []

A recent Chinese use of border clashes in support of foreign policy was triggered by Beijing's anger over alleged Vietnamese rumors of a secret dialogue. []

[] Reports of secret talks, in fact, prompted Deputy Chief of General Staff Xu Xin in early November to quip to US officials that the only contact between China and Vietnam was taking place along the border—with weapons. []

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Serving Military Modernization

In addition to foreign policy goals, Beijing has found the Malipo battlefield an excellent place to advance a national modernization objective—the rebuilding of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a modern fighting force. Concerned by the deficiencies apparent in PLA commanders, weapons, tactics, command and control, and logistics during the 1979 border war, Deng Xiaoping is using today's battles on the Vietnamese border as proving grounds for the rejuvenated officer corps, China's better educated soldiers, and improved weapons. []

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Careers, in fact, have already been made and lost on the Malipo front. Fu Quanyou, commander of Nanjing's 1st Army, apparently drew Beijing's approval for his forces' performance in fierce battles with the Vietnamese in the first three months of this year. A Sichuan provincial newspaper reported that Fu replaced Chengdu military commander Wang Chenghan in June. Subsequent to military region realignment in September, Fu was given larger responsibility for all of southwestern China, including the Yunnan front on the Vietnamese border. Chinese press reports highlight two more junior officers who have received national acclaim and risen quickly through the ranks because of exemplary combat records on the Vietnamese front:

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- Liao Xilong, 43, reportedly handpicked by Deng Xiaoping to be the youngest army-level commander in China. Liao, who probably commands the 14th Army in Yunnan, was commander of the division that first seized the Vietnamese hills in early 1984.

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- Zhang Youxia, 34, son of a PLA general and a deputy division commander, probably in the 14th Army. He is currently studying at the prestigious PLA Military Academy near Beijing, the finishing school for China's general officers.

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Instilling Revolutionary Fervor in China's Youth

The (Jinan) cadets displayed their fearless revolutionary heroic spirit during combat. "The Chinese race cannot be humiliated. Our sacred territory cannot be abandoned." "Willingly we shed our youth blood to build a new great wall for defending our country".... The merits achieved by these cadets are the pride of the motherland.... This makes us feel that the youths of the 1980s are not the so-called "fallen generation" nor the "generation having lost faith" but instead are the warm-blooded sons and daughters of ideals and are ardently in love with the motherland.

Jinan's Dazhong Ribao

16 April 1985

Dearest father and mother, I am now the only person left at the post and may have to sacrifice myself for the nation at any time.... I am not the slightest bit timid or afraid, because after my death there will still be the great motherland.... After my "glory" do not be sad for me, but be proud that I died a glorious martyr's death.

Zhou Shenhui, 18-year-old awarded first-class honors for bravery during August fighting

Hongqi, No. 21

1 November 1985

Early on the morning of 11 September, he and his comrades-in-arms were intercepted by fierce enemy artillery fire while moving toward position 211. Although his left arm was injured, he led the fighters to continue the advance.... When the enemy launched a further artillery bombardment, he ordered the fighters of the whole squad to retreat into a tunnel so as to reduce casualties, while he stood at the tunnel entrance observing enemy movements. Enemy fire wounded his limbs, but he went on directing the combat until he had shed his last drop of blood.

Nie Jianqing, 25 years old at the time of his death, awarded first-class honors for heroism during an 11 September battle

Xian Radio

14 October 1985



Figure 3. A soldier's view.

In addition to testing officers, the border fighting is a useful propaganda tool to remind Chinese youths that they have an obligation to serve in the military. Senior PLA officers worry that the new opportunities available in China's expanding economy and the lower prestige accorded military service recently will lead China's best and brightest youths away from military careers. Thus, a national campaign has been under way for the past six months—probably orchestrated to offset the negative publicity of the current million-man reduction in force—highlighting the contribution and sacrifices of young Chinese soldiers.

The Malipo Front

China's choice of battlefields reflects the carefully calibrated pressure Beijing wishes to bring to bear on Vietnam. A remote and mountainous area opposite

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Three Unspoken Rules of Engagement at Malipo

1. Chinese and Vietnamese airpower is used only for defensive patrols and reconnaissance, not ground attack or offensive strikes.

2. Chinese artillery fire is directed against civilian and military targets north of Ha Giang but never against the city itself.

3. Vietnamese units counterattack against Chinese units and military lines of communication inside Vietnam, but refrain from any major incursions into, or long-range shelling of, Malipo County.

Malipo County, the Malipo front has hilltops that are of no strategic value and are not on a major invasion route into Vietnam. The Chinese claim, according to the US defense attache in Beijing, that they took the hills because the Vietnamese were using them to shell

Chinese hamlets and farms. In fact, their only tactical significance is to provide Chinese gunners excellent positions from which to rain fire down on Vietnamese villages and troop positions.

The 10-kilometer-wide and 5-kilometer-deep Malipo front does provide a veiled threat of a small "second lesson," for it is only 17 kilometers from Ha Giang—one of the provincial capitals occupied during the 1979 invasion. But Beijing ensures that until that decision is made Chinese actions do not disturb the town of Ha Giang.

Beijing appears to be concerned that artillery fire directed at Ha Giang might prompt the Vietnamese to mount major counterattacks or large artillery bombardments into Malipo County.

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[redacted] This has
forced the Vietnamese to redeploy their guns closer to
Ha Giang, giving them only limited ability to shell
Chinese outposts on Vietnamese territory and no
opportunities to hit Chinese civilian targets. [redacted]

Beijing was probably also motivated to choose the
Malipo front to compensate for China's serious mili-
tary shortcomings:

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Chinese Shelling: The Daily Pressure

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Although the Chinese are using 122-mm, 130-mm, and 152-mm artillery pieces to shell the Vietnamese, the vast majority of rounds are fired from shorter range weapons such as 60-mm, 82-mm, and 120-mm mortars and recoilless rifles used by Chinese infantry regiments. The mortars have a maximum range of 6 kilometers and are ideal for the close-in fighting typical along the Malipo front. [REDACTED]

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Trench Warfare

Since April 1984, in hand-to-hand combat from entrenched and bunkered positions, Chinese and Vietnamese infantry forces have attacked and counterattacked for control of three or four of the more vulnerable hilltops. A senior Vietnamese general, in an interview with a Western journalist, last spring estimated that China had fired half a million rounds of artillery and mortar shells into Vietnam's Ha Tuyen Province over the past year. Today, Chinese forces retain control of most higher peaks in this area of the border. Many of the smaller hills have traded hands several times. [REDACTED]

Considerable Costs . . .

The human and materiel price of the Malipo campaign has been considerable. By their own accounts, Chinese forces have fought hundreds of battles for the

hilltops, and casualties have been substantial [REDACTED]

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Military Commission Chairman Deng Xiaoping has tacitly admitted to the high costs on several occasions recently by conferring posthumous decorations on martyrs who have "expended lives and blood to preserve the dignity of the motherland." [REDACTED]

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given that the battles are fought by infantry units attacking entrenched hilltop positions, Vietnamese

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and Chinese casualties must run into the thousands. Anecdotal reports [redacted] tend to confirm significant Chinese losses:

- A Chinese provincial radiobroadcast in June 1984 reported on a newly designed military ambulance that had evacuated 500 wounded from the Malipo front in the first two months of fighting alone.

[redacted]

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[redacted]

Disruptions to the local Chinese economy—supporting from 50,000 to 120,000 men in the field over the past 18 months—also appear to be substantial.

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The bloodiest fighting appears to have taken place in February, when the Chinese threw two divisions—or 24,000 men—into the fray.

[redacted]

[redacted]

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If Malipo has been costly for the Chinese, Vietnam also has paid a high price for its stalwart defense of Ha Tuyen Province. Vietnamese forces—which we estimate to number 30,000 in the area—have not retreated in the face of overwhelming Chinese tactical superiority.

The border also is providing an excellent proving ground for new equipment, some of it acquired from abroad. Chinese television broadcasts over the past summer have shown Chinese soldiers near Malipo using hand-held laser rangefinders and short-range radios produced by the Israeli defense manufacturer, Tadiran.

Beijing has formally requested advanced US mortar-locating radars to use along the Vietnamese front.

And Military Benefits

The Chinese military press increasingly is highlighting the Vietnamese border fighting both for its value as a training ground for Chinese infantry forces and as an international political statement. A 7 April article in the *Liberation Army Daily* boasted that the border fighting has “trained a new generation of reliable soldiers.”

Using the Vietnam conflict as a training ground is, in fact, Chinese military policy. China’s aging high command is well aware of the lack of combat experience in the ground forces and appears to relish the chance to test the mettle of its recently rejuvenated officer corps.

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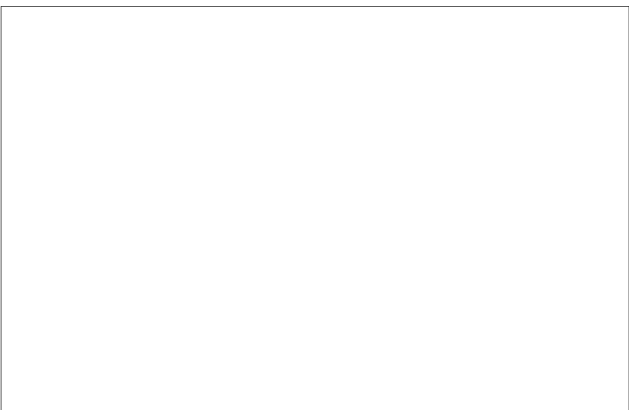
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Figure 10. A Chinese soldier at Malipo uses an Israeli-designed laser rangefinder in support of artillery units.

Liberation Army Pictorial ©



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What's Next?

Beijing shows no signs of changing its strategy.

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And although the Chinese have withdrawn major units from time to time they have always been replaced by other forces.

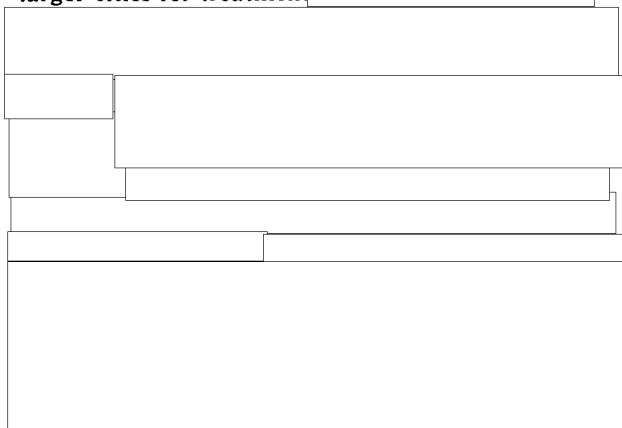
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The Chinese have improved medical evacuation procedures—severely criticized after the 1979 conflict—by using more helicopters to move difficult cases to larger cities for treatment.



Beijing is also reassuring Bangkok that China is prepared to respond to Vietnamese actions along the Thailand-Cambodia border. China's Deputy Chief of Mission to Thailand told his US counterpart in early November that China had "taken steps" to remind Vietnam it does not have a "free hand" against Thailand or the Cambodian resistance.

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Although we believe the fighting at Malipo will continue—intensifying when Beijing seeks to score political points—we doubt the Chinese are prepared

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to open up any new salients.² There would be little additional political mileage to be gained because Beijing seeks to avoid criticism that it is the aggressor; also, a new front would create an additional drain on Chinese economic resources. A new front in Guangxi Province would also be closer to traditional invasion routes, and, given Vietnamese sensitivity, China cannot be sure that it could control a conflict in that area. The Chinese military, moreover, needs no new southern training ground because it has been able to rotate sufficient units and officers through Malipo. Finally, the tenacity with which the Vietnamese have fought against numerically superior forces for the hilltops of Ha Tuyen Province will give the Chinese leadership pause before contemplating the opening of any new "running sores" along the Sino-Vietnamese frontier.

The Chinese will, however, periodically conduct saber-rattling operations along the length of the border to remind Hanoi that China has other options and perhaps to test Vietnamese defenses.

Short of a major Vietnamese incursion into Thailand, however, China is unlikely to expand the scope of the real fighting beyond Malipo. Beijing cannot afford to sidetrack its economic modernization program with an expensive "second lesson" against Vietnam. Moreover, with the major increase in Vietnamese troop strength since 1979 along the China-Vietnam border—and the marked improvement in equipment and training supplied by the Soviet Union—Beijing would

² In the event that Beijing does seek new pressure points, it may choose an area on the Guangxi border, which the Chinese refer to as Fakashan (designated by the Vietnamese as Hill 400). This mountainous area northeast of Lang Son also has contested hilltops, and Chinese leaders often refer to the area in the same breath as Malipo.

probably have to mass a force of over 2 million men—half its standing army—to inflict the same level of damage to Vietnam as it did in 1979. Such a major military incursion—especially if unprovoked—also would run counter to Beijing's efforts to reduce tensions with Moscow.

The View From Hanoi

We believe that Vietnamese forces will continue to react strongly to Chinese forays on the tactical level.

The "thousand thorns," however, are likely to have little effect on Vietnamese policy. Beijing's actions did not deter Hanoi's largest dry-season offensive in six years, and we detect no effort now to move additional Vietnamese divisions to the Chinese border.

Hanoi's leaders appear to be gauging correctly the limits of the Chinese strategy and display confidence that local commanders can successfully manage the pressure. We foresee no Vietnamese effort to match the Chinese buildup opposite Ha Tuyen Province, an area of limited strategic significance. China's policy of keeping border tensions within carefully controlled bounds—not building up, for example, along traditional invasion corridors—has not been lost on Hanoi who has no compelling reason to respond in kind to Chinese provocations.

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